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ABSTRACT

An experimental course, "Thinking about Writing," was started in 1999 at the University of Dundee and ran for three years across the first half of the B.Ed. Degree course for two consecutive years. The unit's focus was on a metacognitive approach to understanding writing, particularly knowledge about writing and monitoring of the writing process. Across the two years of involvement for each group of students there was a program of teaching and application. One of the earlier parts of the course examined how students' awareness and understanding of themselves as writers might relate to some of the theoretical writing models. To promote this, information was collected from the students which covered the areas: knowing what they were being asked to do; understanding their selection of the most appropriate way to write for the task; and how they established the content of their writing. These data were analyzed and categorized to produce a composite framework of students' perceptions of their own participation in writing. These views were compared with, and related to, the different theoretical models of writing. The Hayes (1996) model was selected for further examination, and evidence collected from students was shown to match well with its theoretical constructs. This paper discusses the development of a writer profile, after it was decided to link the Hayes writing model to students' personal writing experiences. The paper then discusses the comparison of the writer profile with writer competence and the creation of a student's writer profile. It explains that to compare the student's own profiles with those of the children they teach, an average writer profile for each was prepared. Findings suggest that the use of the framework of the Hayes model of writing as the basis for a writer profile is highly experimental and is in the very early stages of development as a research tool. (NKA)

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The Development and Use of a Writer Profile.

by Jim Ewing

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The development and use of a writer profile

Jim Ewing, University of Dundee 19th World Congress on Reading, 2002

Background

Student teachers' own competence in writing now features regularly in all University courses of teacher education and minimum standards of literacy are expected of all students completing such qualification courses. At the University of Dundee, an experimental course on 'Thinking about Writing' was started in 1999 and ran for three years across the first half of the BEd degree course for two consecutive year groups.

The Thinking about Writing unit was directed at the first half of the students' course rather than the latter half as it was argued that there were some advantages in promoting an early understanding of the teaching of writing, such as in promoting opportunities for application and implementation during the students' school experience placements. The thrust of the unit was to focus on a metacognitive approach to understanding writing, with particular attention given to knowledge about writing and to monitoring and control (regulation) of the writing process.

Across the two years of involvement for each group of students there was a programme of teaching and application. The teaching normally related to an aspect of metacognition as it applied to the teaching of writing and the application was an opportunity for the students to implement or reflect upon their learning about metacognition. The whole course was structured to lead from a general consideration of what metacognition is, through an examination of some of the key elements which make up a metacognitive approach to teaching writing, to ways of helping children in the classroom become more metacognitively aware of their own involvement in writing.

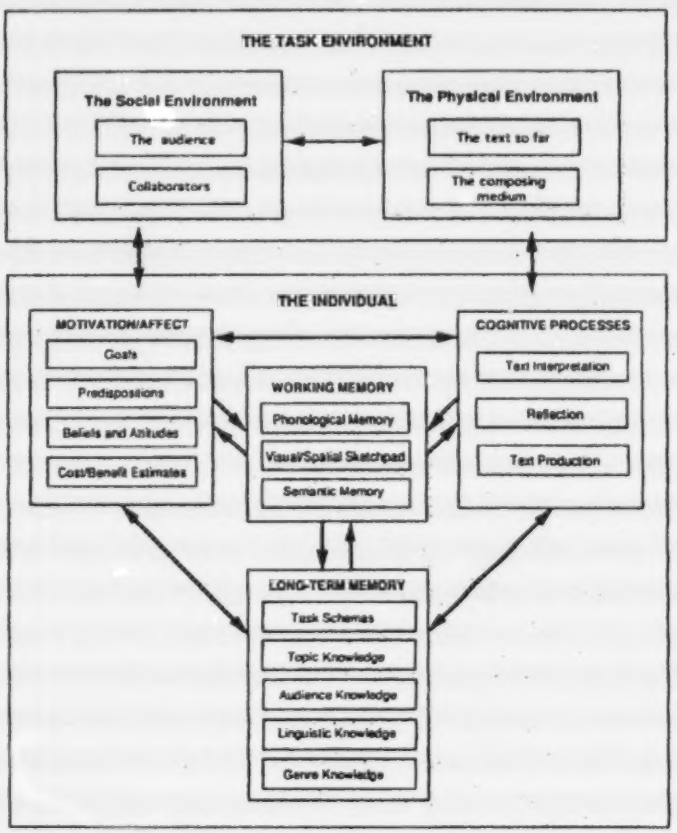
One of the earlier parts of the experimental course was to examine how students' awareness and understanding of themselves as writers might relate to some of the theoretical models or explanations of writing. To promote this, information was collected from the students about their awareness of how they approached a set piece of writing. This information covered the areas: knowing what they were being asked to do; understanding their selection of the most appropriate way to write for the task; and how they established the content of their writing.

These data were analysed and categorised to produce a composite framework of students' perceptions of their own participation in writing. These views were compared with and related to, the different theoretical models of writing. The Hayes (1996) model was selected for further examination and the evidence collected from the students was shown to match well with its theoretical constructs. This was shared with the students and they agreed that to link the observations of themselves as writers with a theoretical model was an important part of helping students to develop a metacognitive approach to teaching writing in the classroom. They were encouraged to see that metacognition was a part of their current cognitive activity and that it related to their own thoughts and actions in a writing task. In this way, the course hoped to demystifying the potentially complex notion of metacognition, for students who were (at that stage) in their first year on a University course.

The development of a writer profile

After the introduction and examination of the Hayes (1996) model of writing (shown in Figure 1, below) it was decided to attempt to link it to personal writing *experiences* of the students. They were therefore asked to describe their writing experiences under the headings of each of the major elements of the model; the social environment, the physical environment, cognitive processes, long term memory and motivation/affect. Neither the sub categories of each of these, nor the element of working memory were used at this stage.

Figure 1 Hayes' model of writing (Hayes, 1996)



This was called a writer profile and the reason for not including working memory in the writing profile was that this element of writing was seen as more difficult compared with the other elements, for the students to identify their personal features related to writing.

Prior to attempting to complete a personal writer profile, each of the elements was elaborated in a class discussion and the types of personal feature likely to be associated with each were identified. Some examples are,

The Social Environment - all the aspects of the influences of other people on what, when, how and why you write. This includes sharing with and listening to others, collaborating or writing for others as well as recognising the influences others may have on your writing approach.

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Motivation/Affect - all the things that influence how you feel about writing; the apprehensions as well as the excitements and pleasures. It also includes the difficulties which you might have in getting started or how your enthusiasm might easily be lost before you get finished.
The Physical Environment - all the parts of your physical environment which affect your writing such as surroundings, noise, facilities available, and interruptions from others. It also includes all that you have already written for a particular task and how what you have just written, influences what you will write next.
Cognitive Processes - all the thinking which affects your writing, such as planning, thinking about and taking decisions, trying to work things out, coping with challenges, and your understandings.
Long-Term Memory - all that you have available from your past experience and how you use all of this and are conscious of it all. It also includes how easy it is to access the memories you have and how much you will try to remember things from your past.

Finally, in discussion it became clear that the students wanted to be able to use their writer profiles to see if there were types of profile which were linked with more successful writing. However, it was very likely that they would use different words to describe themselves in their individual profiles, with the consequence that any attempt to analyse or compare writer profiles would be very difficult. By common consent, therefore, it was decided that each element of the profile would be given a 'value' as well as a description and that such value would be on the basis of 1, 2 or 3 where 3 represented a high value, and 1 a low value. These were summarised as

3 - definitely valuable me / very significant for me /important for me / certainly applies to me
2 -valuable for me but less so / a bit less important
1 - not very much for me / does not seem to figure very prominently.

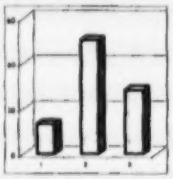
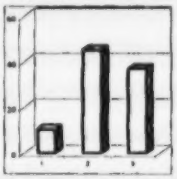
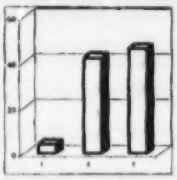
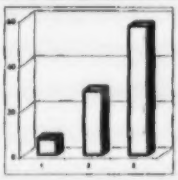
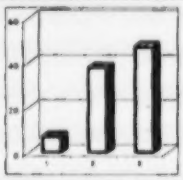
At this stage the students were asked to complete a writer profile based on their current perceptions of themselves as writers.

The production of student writer profiles

The students were still in the first year of their four year BEd degree course when they produced their writer profile and this was the first time they had attempted this task. It took several weeks (including two reminders) for the students to complete their profiles and many of them probably found it difficult. In the end there were 92 completed profiles.

Using the numerical scores which the students gave to each of the elements in the writer profile, an analysis was undertaken of the features of the individual profile elements and the differences between students. The distribution of scores for each of the five elements did suggest some differences, as shown in Figure 2 (below). The social environment was rated lower than the others and it recorded the lowest number of the scores. The written comments which the students made for this element of the profile were predominantly in terms of consultation with others, usually their peers, but sometimes the tutor. Alongside these comments were observations that the students felt less need to consult as they progressed through the course and secondly that they used this consultation to reassure themselves they were on the right track.

Figure 2 Mean value and distribution of scores given for each category of writer profile

The Social Environment	Motivation / Affect	The Physical Environment	Cognitive Processes	Long Term Memory
				
Mean = 2.145	Mean = 2.295	Mean = 2.455	Mean = 2.545	Mean= 2.435

The scores given to the cognitive processes element were the highest of all the elements and it had more high scores of '3' than any of the others. The written comments given for this part of the profile were predominantly in terms of planning, but with relatively few students mentioning such specific cognitive processes as choosing, deciding, clarifying concepts and making links.

For the motivation element of the profile, with the second lowest ratings overall, the students reported most frequently on their difficulty in getting started on a piece of writing, while others suggested that the subject or content focus of the writing task was the major motivational concern. The value of motivation overall, however, seemed to be low in the whole profile.

The physical environment was the second highest element overall and attracted very few of the lowest scores of '1'. It was interpreted by the majority of those who responded, as getting the writing to reflect the task and this was ensured by frequent reference back to the question as it was set. Gathering and using resources for writing were also reported but there were very few instances of looking back at what had been written as a part of the development of the writing.

Long term memory appeared to rate around the middle of writer profile and most of the comments given, related to this being seen as a store of material which could be used as the content for a piece of writing. There were very few comments about specific knowledge concerning writing skills or styles.

When discussing the creation of a writing profile, the students had wanted to see if they might have a relationship with skills in writing and this was examined next.

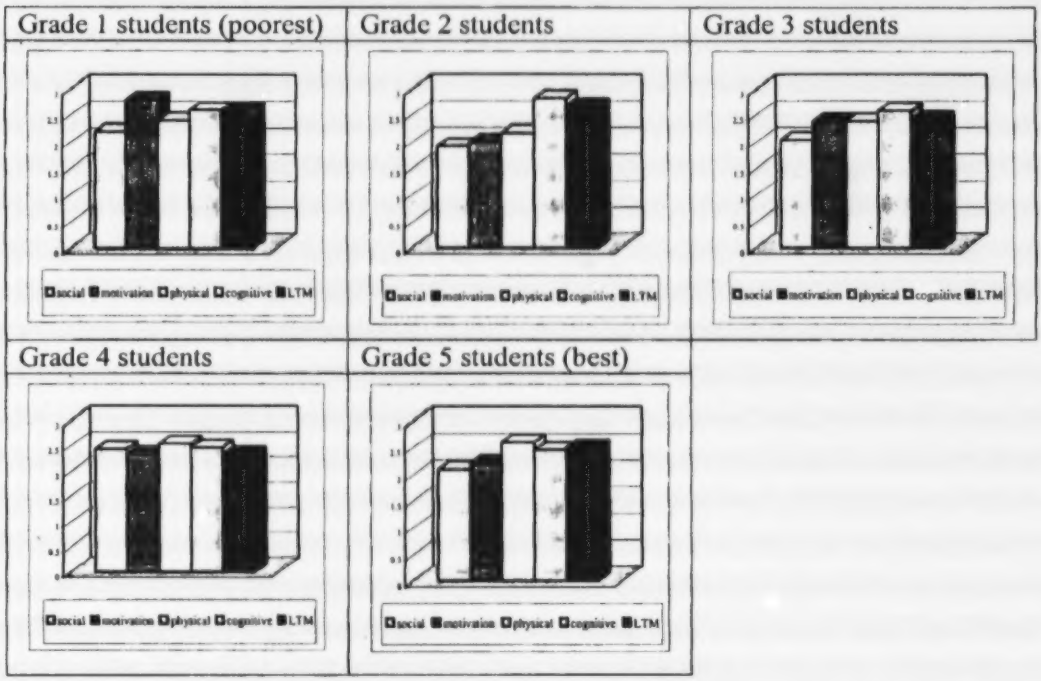
Comparison of writer profile with writer competence

As a part of their course, the students were engaged in the development of their own writing through a learning programme of which the key elements were; purpose in writing, preparation for writing, planning for writing, the writing process, sharing drafts and revising their own writing.

One of the outcomes of this programme was an assessed piece of writing giving a performance grade and of the 92 students who completed a writer profile there was a writing grade for 89 of them. The writer profiles of all those who fell into each grade were re-analysed and an average profile was calculated. These were based on the average score given

to the five elements of the writer profile, for all the students with any one writing grade and are shown in Figure 3 (below).

Figure 3 Average profiles for students in each grade of writing assessment



The most observable differences in these profiles lie in the scores given to the motivation part of the writer profile (column two in Figure 3) and possibly with the physical environment aspect (column three). For the poorest writers, motivation was the most important element of the profile and it was rated more highly with these writers than at any other grade. With the physical environment, there is a more general trend of lower ratings among student with the lower writing grades and higher ratings for those at the other end of the writing performance scale. On examination of what the students had written as their comments for this element, it was found that only a few had included comments about looking back at what they had written to help with the next part of their writing and that these few students were in the category of the highest writing performance.

It is likely that the writer profile as it was used on this occasion is not a sufficiently focussed instrument to be able to correlate well with the individual's writing achievement. Perhaps using a larger number of writing samples or having greater experience in creating a personal writer profile would have produced a more definitive relationship between the two.

To extend the students' awareness of the value of looking at the writer, a subsequent application of the writer profile was based on the children the students taught in the Primary school classroom.

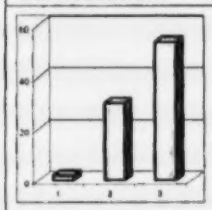
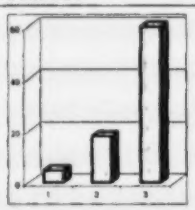
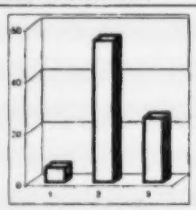
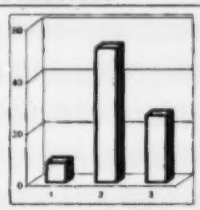
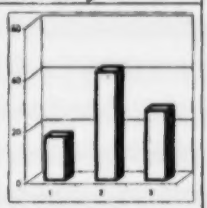
Creating a pupil's writer profile

At the first attempt at creating a writer profile the students identified features of themselves as writers. Within the context of this experimental course on thinking about writing, it had always been the intention to move beyond students thinking about themselves as writers to thinking about teaching writing and therefore to focus on the writing needs of the children they would be teaching. In the first term of the second year their course, the students were therefore asked to look closely at the children they were teaching during a forthcoming teaching placement and identify for some children, a group rather than an individual or a whole class, the features which would fit a profile of writing. All the supporting information about the elements of the writer profile were again examined in this new context and given to the students to assist them in the task.

Both the numerical scores and the individual comments were collected for pupil writer profiles and the distribution of these for each of the elements is shown in Figure 4 (below). There were 87 completed profiles.

There are some noticeable differences between the students' own writer profiles (Figure 2) and the writer profiles for the children they teach. Long term memory has become rated the lowest with more scores at the lowest value than in any other element. In the comments made about long term memory, the students made many more observations about the relevance of memory for retaining information on the rules of writing in the context of the children's writer profile than they had for their own writer profile. They also commented that a substantial number of children had difficulty storing or recalling information about the rules of writing, perhaps supporting its low value rating in the writer profile.

Figure 4 Mean value and distribution of scores given for each category of writer profile

The Social Environment	Motivation /Affect	The Physical Environment	Cognitive Processes	Long Term Memory
				
Mean = 2.607	Mean = 2.673	Mean = 2.223	Mean = 2.209	Mean= 2.115

The element with the highest scores was that relating to motivation, which had been rated as one of the lower features of the students' own writer profile. The range of comments about motivation identified differences between children in relation to age and ability. Of all the comments recorded, a high proportion (almost 70%) indicated that pupils were positively motivated towards writing, while a much smaller proportion (around 20%) appeared to be poorly motivated. In most of the cases where low motivation was indicated, this was given as relating to children were less able or lacked confidence in writing or to specific contexts which children found unmotivating. The students seemed to realise that an important role of the teacher was finding ways to motivate the children as part of being a good teacher. They recognised a wide range of aspects of teaching which contributed to pupil motivation such as nature of the writing task, personal interests, objects and pictures relating to the writing task, and rewards or 'star writer awards'.

The second lowest element was that relating to cognitive processes, where responses were typified by the various skills involved in planning and drafting. The students had rated the cognitive processes element as the highest in their own writer profile. However, a large number of them reported that their children did not like planning or drafting and saw little value in these activities, resulting in the overall low rating.

The social environment was rated at the second highest in the children's profile although it had been the lowest for the students themselves. Most of the comments were in connection with the use of small group discussions as a means of getting children started writing and supporting their ongoing efforts.

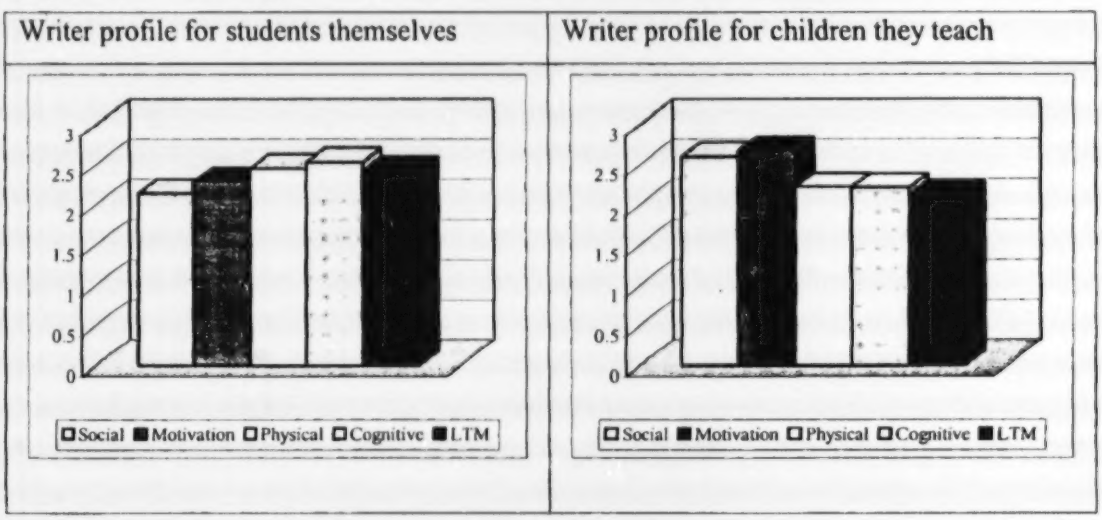
It was the physical environment which was in the middle position for the children and the majority of the comments appeared to refer largely to the workspace features rather than the writing which children had just completed.

It was fairly clear that as the students were creating the children's writer profile they were only partially taking the perspective of the child. There were many comments where it was clear that students reflected what they saw as important for their children, resulting in the scores allocated probably reflecting more what *should* be children's profile than what it might have been if they had produced it themselves.

An average writer profile

To compare the student's own profiles with those of the children they teach, an average writer profile for each was prepared (see Figure 5 below). The differences between the two lie in the general trend of the highest ratings for the elements in the students' own profiles becoming the lowest rated elements in the children's profiles and *vice versa*.

Figure 5 Average Writer Profile for students themselves and for children they teach



The differences between the two profiles were taken to be indicative of the students' discrimination, perhaps unwittingly, between expert writers (themselves) and novice writers (the children they were teaching). This was confirmed when the students were asked if they could explain this finding and they suggested that during writing in the classroom their

children seemed to have less awareness of the cognitive features of writing and certainly had a more restricted long term memory than adults. Consequently the importance of these two elements of the writer profile for children were judged to be at a lower level of importance than they were for the writer profile of themselves.

With regard to the change in relevance of the social environment, the students suggested that the social aspects of writing were important for their children because it was recognised that this was an advantage when developing writing skills and experience. They were of the view that for themselves as mature (experienced) writers, the importance of the social aspects of writing were no longer as significant. They recognised that the need for the social influence on writing was a feature of novice writers but which was less for expert writers.

Overall the differences between the two writer profiles was taken to indicate that the students had been able to view the writing process as having distinguishing features of the involvement of themselves as writers and of the children they were teaching and that these were not the same. This difference might be explained by the nature of novice writers compared with expert writers. However, it was not clear at this stage how much students' awareness of the difference was based on a metacognitive understanding of the writing process or, further, how much they were attempting to use their metacognitive understanding of writing in their teaching of writing in the classroom.

Implications and conclusions

This use of the framework of the Hayes (1996) model of writing as the basis for a writer profile is highly experimental and it is at the very early stages of development as a research tool. Its use in this way was the result of trying to find a means of extending and elaborating students' reflection on, and consideration of, the primary features of the Hayes model as they might describe the key features of the writing process. Although the model is presented with several dual-direction arrows (see Figure 1), it is in many ways a 'static' model, representing what are the stable elements of writing. The interconnecting arrows provide for some form of interaction between most of the elements but without elaborating what or how that interaction might take place. Moreover, these interactions were not emphasised with the students, in the application of the Hayes model to a writer profile.

There are two possible benefits arising from students attempting to compile a writer profile. Firstly there has been a focus on the aspects of writing identified by Hayes as primary elements of the writing process and the students have attempted to interpret these by looking at themselves as writers and by looking at the children they teach in the classroom. If nothing else, the gain has been in terms of the students having carried out such analyses and have pursued a more detailed and perhaps more informed or insightful view of writing, as it relates to the writer. The second worthwhile outcome has been that the students have had to find out by their own efforts what the differences are between beginning and experienced writers (novice and expert) and thereby gain a better vision of where children are in their progression to becoming accomplished writers.

As a predictor of successful writers, it is unlikely that the writer profile as it has been used in this experimental study is particularly worthwhile. It could possibly be examined more thoroughly and the use of a wider range of values for each element could be investigated. It may however lead to a level of artificiality which is not helpful in examining what is important in the teaching of writing. To focus on the elements of the Hayes model may be as

far as a use of the model should go and to try to give them numerical values adds little. It may be better to examine what other aspects of teaching writing can be linked with the model, such as thinking skills, the role of memory and self regulation.

Reference

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